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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 001371

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/22/2016

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SUBJECT: OONI & MINISTER KAYODE: ODILI IS STRONG, NEXT
PRESIDENT NEEDS DIVERSE CABINET

Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Browne for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. On October 23, the Consul General met then Minister of Culture and Tourism (now the Minister of Aviation) Chief Fani Kayode, and the Ooni of Ife, the Yoruba's most prominent traditional leader and a close ally of President Obasanjo. The Ooni said President Obasanjo was prepared to leave office but was not prepared to relinquish national power to the North. The Ooni believed Governor Peter Odili of Rivers State was the strongest southern candidate and thus the Ooni supported him. Both the Ooni and the Minister recommended that the next President not only have a northern running mate but a geographically diverse cabinet as well. End Summary.

South-South Odili Is the Strongest Candidate

¶2. (C) If the Niger Delta fails to claim the 2007 Presidency, that region could detonate, exclaimed traditional Yoruba leader and close ally of President Obasanjo, the Ooni of Ife, in an October 23 meeting with the Consul General. The south-south has never controlled Nigeria and has been clamoring for its turn, the Nigerian Minister of Culture and Tourism, Chief Fani Kayode echoed. Governor Peter Odili of Rivers State is the southern candidate with the most political muscle and sufficiently hardened temperament to win an election and govern a nation as difficult as Nigeria, the Ooni postulated.

¶3. (C) Assessing other presidential/vice presidential candidates' weaknesses, the Ooni said Cross River's Donald Duke was Odili's main southern competitor but ultimately was a novice who needed more seasoning before aspiring for the top office. Turning north, he said Governor Ahmadu Adamu Mu'azu of Bauchi has done well but is from a small state. Governor Alhaji Ahmed Mohammed Makarfi of Kaduna has talent but is physically frail.

Need Regionally Diverse Cabinet

14. (C) While reinforcing the Ooni's support of Odili, Kayode stressed the importance of geopolitically diverse cabinet appointments. Minister Kayode said that the election of a President and Vice President would only satisfy two of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. The only way to take the sting out of not getting one of the top posts is to ensure that the other zones get key cabinet positions of significant interest to those zones. Kayode said he would stress to President Obasanjo the need to incorporate representatives from other zones in the cabinet.

15. (C) The Ooni described the selection of Nigeria's next group of leaders as a negotiation process. Care must be taken to make sure all important interests were satisfied. Right now, given the problems in the Niger Delta and the cardinal importance of that region to Nigeria's salubrity, it made sense to give that region the Presidency. Conversely, the Ooni warned that returning the Presidency to the North would be retrograde. A northern president would fall eventually under the spell of an atavistic northern elite intent on smiting the reforms of the Obasanjo administration, the Ooni asserted. According to the Ooni, a president from the Niger Delta would have a greater affinity for the United States than a northerner would. A south-south president would be more amenable to U.S. influence and recommendations, the Ooni gesticulated.

Comment

16. (C) The Ooni believes Governor Odili is the best choice as the President's successor and the Ooni also believes the

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President sees Odili in the same light. That Minister Kaydoe endorsed the Ooni's position reveals, in part, the extent to which a younger Yoruba must act almost diffident around a traditional elder. However, it also indicates that Odili is in the good books of the President's insiders. While perhaps not the most popular aspirant, Odili is thus far the south-south's most visible one. Having allies like the Ooni will only help Odili in the backroom give-and-take that will likely produce the next PDP presidential candidate. End
Comment.
BROWNE